



Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.



## Letter to the Editor

## Protecting health workers' mental health during COVID-19



As health systems globally are overwhelmed by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), health workers 'must be protected'<sup>1</sup> as 'every country's most valuable resource.'<sup>2</sup> This must go beyond access to effective personal protective equipment. Measures to support the enormous psychological burden faced by frontline health workers worldwide are urgently needed.

The global surge in demand for health care is placing health workers under severe pressure, including frustration, exhaustion, difficult triage decisions and traumatic patient outcomes, exacerbated by physical distancing measures and isolation. In addition, the high risk of infection, inadequate protection from contamination and illness and death in their medical colleagues places their mental health under significant threat and is compounded by concerns of transmitting infection within their households.

The psychological effects of COVID-19 among health workers in Wuhan, where the novel coronavirus emerged, include stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, denial, anger and fear,<sup>3</sup> with similar reports from those in Italy, Spain and New York, where health systems have been overwhelmed with COVID-19. This is consistent with the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak<sup>4</sup> and should therefore be expected across health settings worldwide during the current pandemic.

Psychological distress can directly impede health workers' ability to provide safe, timely and effective care, while also having lasting impacts on their mental health.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore of paramount importance that their psychological well-being is safeguarded, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where stigma and discrimination associated with mental health and gaps in mental health services prevent timely help-seeking and favourable outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

Health systems should heed the advice of the World Health Organization (WHO) in safeguarding the mental health of their frontline health workers<sup>6</sup> and take lessons from those ahead of them in the pandemic's evolution. The Second Xiangya Hospital in China, for example, provided a psychological intervention plan to support frontline health workers during the outbreak.<sup>7</sup> This included group activities, a psychological assistance hotline and online courses for dealing with stress, along with staff training, practical assistance and protected time for in-person counselling. In Wuhan, local government addressed mental health problems by recognising health workers with COVID-19 infection as having work-related injuries

and redeploying staff from less pressurised provinces to reduce workload in overwhelmed hospitals.<sup>3</sup>

The global health response to COVID-19 must be that every country urgently provides multifaceted psychological safeguarding of the mental health of their frontline health workers, learning from previous epidemics and the experience of affected countries, to protect healthcare providers' effectiveness, secure their longevity and recognise their value as indispensable resources.

## References

1. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. COVID-19: health care heroes need protection – UN expert. 27 March 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25754&LangID=E>. [Accessed 12 May 2020].
2. The Lancet. COVID-19: protecting health-care workers. *Lancet* 21 March 2020;395:922. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30644-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30644-9). [Accessed 12 May 2020].
3. Kang J, Li Y, Hu S, Chen M, Yang C, Yang BX, et al. The mental health of medical workers in Wuhan, China dealing with the 2019 novel coronavirus. *Lancet Psychiatr* 2020;7:14. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30047-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30047-X). [Accessed 12 May 2020].
4. Wu P, Fang Y, Guan Z, Fan B, Kong J, Yao Z, et al. The psychological impact of the SARS epidemic on hospital employees in China: exposure, risk perception, and altruistic acceptance of risk. *Can J Psychiatr* 01 May 2009;55(5). <https://doi.org/10.1177/070674370905400504>. [Accessed 12 May 2020].
5. Patel V, Saxena S, Lund C, Thornicroft G, Baingana F, Bolton P, et al. The Lancet Commission on global mental health and sustainable development. *Lancet* 27 October 2018;392:1553–98. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)31612-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31612-X). [Accessed 12 May 2020].
6. World Health Organization. *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak*. 18 March 2020. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf>. [Accessed 12 May 2020].
7. Chen Q, Liang M, Li Y, Guo J, Fei D, Wang L, et al. Mental health care for medical staff in China during the COVID-19 outbreak. *Lancet Psychiatr* 01 April 2020;7:15–6. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30078-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30078-X). [Accessed 12 May 2020].

R. Armitage\*, L.B. Nellums  
Division of Epidemiology & Public Health, University of Nottingham,  
Nottingham City Hospital, Hucknall Road, Nottingham, NG5 1PB, UK  
E-mail address: [mszlb@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:mszlb@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk) (L.B. Nellums).

\* Corresponding author.  
E-mail address: [msxra37@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:msxra37@nottingham.ac.uk) (R. Armitage).

12 May 2020  
Available online 30 May 2020